DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 176 586 FL 010 737

AUTHOR Schiffrin, Deborah
TITLE A Quantitative Analysis of the Historical Present Tense in Narrative.
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the meeting of the Linguistic Society of America (Boston, Massachusetts, December 28, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Connected Discourse; *Discourse Analysis; Grammar; *Language Patterns; Language Research; Language Styles; *Language Usage; Language Variation; *Narration; Sentences; Sociolinguistics; *Syntax; *Verbs
IDENTIFIERS *Tense (Verbs)

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a quantitative analysis of the historical present tense (HP) in English. The tokens of HP in narrative clauses, such as "he's smiling, an' he picks up the card," are referentially equivalent to their past tense alternants in the phrases, "he was smiling an' he picked up the card." Previous analysis of HP view it as an expressive and subjective device; for example, it is argued that the HP/past tense alternation marks important transitions between narrative events. It is also said to have social correlates, for example, social class and speaker-hearer intimacy. A variable rule analysis of data from narratives told by Philadelphians in sociolinguistic interviews provides empirical support for some of the suggestions of earlier analyses. It also shows that various grammatical and expressive constructions, which integrate the clause into the temporal frame of the narrative and thus avoid ambiguity in time reference, have a positive effect. The implications of the results for the study of narrative and discourse are noted. (Author/AMH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED176586

A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE HISTORICAL PRESENT TENSE IN NARRATIVE

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Deborah Schiffrin

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

FL010737

Deborah Schiffrin
Dept. of Linguistics
University of Penna.

Paper presented at the Linguistic Society of America Meetings
Dec. 28, 1978; Boston, Mass.

© Deborah Schiffrin

1. In this paper, I discuss the role of different tense sequences in organizing events in personal narratives. As defined by Labov (1972), personal narratives recapitulate a past experience by matching a sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which occurred in the experience. Their defining characteristic is a relationship of temporal juncture between two clauses: if a change in the order of the two clauses, results in a change in the interpretation of what actually happened, then those two clauses can be considered narrative clauses, and the events reported, narrative events. Narrative events form the complicating action section of a narrative-- this is the section that tells the story-- and it is tense sequencing within this section of narrative, which is the focus of this paper.

On the first page of the handout (inserted at end of paper), is an excerpt from a personal narrative. The speaker is describing an experience which he had in the hospital after an accident. The clauses with a C.A. in the margin, are complicating action clauses, for example, clauses f through p. There are other types of clauses in the narrative. Clause a for example, is an evaluation clause: it indicates the point of the narrative, and why it is being told. Clause b is an orientation clause: orientation clauses help to identify the time and place of the narrated events, the major participants, and so on, to provide a framework for the events to follow.

Orientation to the narrative framework, and evaluatbn of narrative events, can be accomplished by means other than orientation and evaluation clauses. Evidence will be presented here, to show that tense sequencing is a device-- within the complicating action section of narrative, and thus, internal to the recounting of the experience-- which has an orientation function.

2. There are four possible tense sequences in the complicating action section of narrative, and they are the result of two different alternations. The first alternation is between the past tense and the historical present. The historical present, or HP for short, is a use of the present tense which is referentially equivalent to the past.

Clause k is in the HP-- "and around twelve, I wake up with excruciating pain"-- and clause l is in the past tense-- "and I rang to the nurse"-- but the temporal reference of both of these narrated events is in the past. The second alternation can be seen not by looking within one clause, but by looking across clauses in sequence: is the tense used in one clause, maintained in the next clause, or does it switch? Whereas clauses m and n for example, show a cluster of HP's-- "and she says, 'Yes dear' and I says 'I'm in pain' "-- clauses o and p illustrate a switch from the HP to the past-- "she says, 'Just a minute and I'll look at your chart.' She looked at my chart." Similarly, there are sequences of two past tenses, and of a switch from past tense to HP. On the bottom of the first page of the handout, are the four different tense sequences, and how they result from these two alternations.

Past analyses of the historical present have focused not on these four tense sequences, but on one or the other of the alternations. Traditional analyses contrast the HP to the past tense, suggesting that it makes past events in the story more vivid. On the other hand, Wolfson (1976), has argued that it is the second alternation which is important: the tense switching itself, be it a switch from past to HP, or from HP to past. 3. My focus in this paper is on the two tense sequences which are the result of tense switching-- sequences of past-HP and HP-past-- and their occurrence in different discourse environments in the narrative. I also briefly compare these two switches: if the alternation between switching tenses, and not switching tenses, is more important than the alternation between HP and past, we would expect a switch to the past to occur in the same environments as a switch to the HP.

My data consists of 75 narratives told during sociolinguistic interviews, carried out by myself and other members of a research project on sound change in the Philadelphia speech community (Principal investigator: William Labov). A total of 1100 narrative clauses from the complicating action sections of these narratives were coded according to their tense sequences, and a variable rule analysis performed.

A variable rule accounts for patterned variation in language by positing that every possible constraint on the application of the rule has associated with it, a probability as to whether or not that rule will apply. Using the variable rule analysis developed by Cedergren and Sankoff (1974), allows one to estaimate the probabilistic effects of constraints on the operation of the rule. The data is analyzed by the variable rule program according to whether the rule does, or does not, apply: in this case, does the tense switch rule apply to produce an output with a sequence of two different tenses, or does it not apply, so as to produce an output with a "cluster" of the same tense? Constraints which can be stated in the environmental description of the rule, form factors, and the set of all possible factors which can occur within a given environment, form a factor group.

On the second page of the handout, are the factor groups and individual factors whose effects on tense sequencing will be reported on here.[1] Presented for each factor, is the number of tokens occurring in that environment, and going across, the percentage of those tokens resulting from a tense switch, and next, the percentage of those tense switches, which were a switch to the HP. In the last two columns, are the probabilities of a tense switch rule applying, and of a switch to HP rule applying. 3.1Note first, the overall results. Out of 1100 tokens, 21% (236) were the result of a tense switch, either past-HP or HP-past. The input probability of the tense switch rule applying was .44. As my discussion of the data will show however, a tense switch was more likely in some environments, and less likely in others. Keep in mind that a probability above .50 indicates environments where the application of the rule is favored, and a probability below .50, environments where the application of the rule is disfavored.

Note next, that of the 236 swithes, 51% were a switch to the HP; the switch to HP rule applied with an input probability of .65. This means that overall, a switch from past to HP occurred in roughly half the cases, and a switch from HP to past, in the

other half. This initial symmetry in the direction of tense switching is deceptive however, because it suggests that the direction of the switch doesn't really matter As discussion of the rest of the data will show, there are some environments which clearly favor a switch to the HP over a switch to the past, and others which favor a switch to the past.

3.2 Consider the first factor group, scene boundaries. Scene boundaries frame a group of events which form a scene within the narrative. Not all scenes are bounded and bracketed by these specialized clauses, and only those which are framed in this way are considered here. Opening brackets are clauses which introduce the next event, for example, "the next thing that happened was...", "and the next thing I knew....". They do not represent narrative events in and of themselves, but function more as meta-narrative devices, which provide a commentary on the narrative events to follow.[2] The initial event is the first event in the scene, i.e. the event which has been introduced by the opening bracket. The closing bracket provides a conclusion to the scene.

Of all the other narrative clauses, only 20% contained a tense switch. In contrast, 36% of the opening brackets, contained a tense switch, and the probability of the switch was higher, .53. 46% of the initial events contained a tense switch, and there is a still higher probability of the switch rule applying here, .69. Note next, a difference between opening brackets and initial events in terms of the direction of the switch: with opening brackets, there is a .62 probability that the switch will be from the past to the HP; with initial events, there is a lower probability, .43, that the switch will be from the past to the HP.

These results show that switching is less likely in opening brackets, clauses which provide an orientation to a new scene, than in the beginning event of that scene. When the switch does occur however, it is more likely to be a switch to the HP.[3] This suggests that the HP has an orientation effect: it lets the hearer know that a new scene is about

to begin. Once the scene is entered, and the initial event reported, a tense switch is more likely than it was with the opening bracket, and this switch is more likely to be from the HP to the past-- in the other direction. Thus, switching from past to HP provides an orientation to a new scene, and switching from HP to past marks the beginning of that new scene.

These observations are supported in a variety of ways in the rest of the data. Consider the next factor group, transitional connectives. 19% of the clauses without connectives contained a tense switch. In contrast, the connectives well, all of a sudden and so clearly favor the application of a switching rule: probabilities associated with these constraints are .80, .69 and .57 respectively.[+]

Note that some of the percentages for switching to HP with connectives are based on fairly small cells, so that most of the observations to follow are based on the 130 tokens in the largest cell, so. As noted, connectives favor tense switching. Note next, that given the tense switch, that switch is more likely to be a switch from the HP to the past. This is indicated with so, where the probability associated with the switch to HP rule was only .39.

There are two observations relevant to the full interpretation of these trends. First, other data to be reported on in a longer version of this study, suggest that a cluster of HP's groups events together into one scene, so that a transitional connective, which introduces a new scene, strongly disfavors a sequence of two HP's-- hence, the switch out of the HP into the past.

Second, there is a functional similarity between transitional connectives and opening brackets. Connectives indicate that a new scene is about to begin, and in this sense, they act as an abbreviated marker of an opening bracket: a connective like so can be paraphrased as "the next thing that happened was...". Events reported in clauses with so can then be seen as initial events, because they too, are introduced by an opening bracket. As noted above, tense switching with initial events is more likely to be

into the past, so that this same result with connectives is not surprising. Since a switch to the HP orients the hearer to the opening of a new scene, when that orientation is done by other devices-- such as opening brackets, and connectives-- the switch which does occur, is more likely to be from the HP into the past tense.

The fourth factor group, which contains all the factors which occurred in the auxiliary, contains tremendous variation, but the main results are consistent with what I have suggested so far. Consider first, do not, modals and iterative quasi-modals, such as keep. These are powerful constraints on the occurrence of tense switching, and on switching to the HP. This is not surprising: if switching occurs as an orientation to a new event, and to mark the beginning of the new event, then it should not be likely to occur with do not, which indicates the non-occurrence of an event, with modals, which indicate possible events, or with keep, which indicates repeated events subsidiary to the main events.

Similarly, the low percentage of tense switching with progressives is not surprising: the progressive functions in narrative to indicate a continuing event, during which other events occur simultaneously. In so doing, however, progressives provide a frame-work-- an orientation-- for the events which follow. Recall that opening brackets, which also provided an orientation for events to follow, favored a switch from the past to the HP. Thus, it is not surprising that 71% of the switches that did occur with the progressive, were into the HP, with a .76 probability of rule application. In contrast, inceptive quasi-modals, such as start, which begin events, more strongly favored the switching rule, but did not as strongly favor the switch to HP rule.

Factor groups 3 and 5 are mentioned only briefly: the lower percentages of tense switching with and and when the focus of action (the subject of the clause) remains the same provides evidence that switching is less likely in environments where events are not separated into different scenes.

4. To summarize: the alternation between the historical present and past tense, and the alternation between switching tense and maintaining the same tense across narrative clauses, produce four different tense sequences in the complicating action section of narrative. Past analyses have focused on one or the other of the alternations. A variable rule analysis of the two tense sequences which result from a switch in tense shows, however, that these two sequences are more or less likely according to <u>different</u> discourse environments. These results mean that although the alternation between switching tense and not switching tense is important, so, too, is what tense the switch results in— past or historical present. The direction of the tense switch depends on subtle differences in function between the historical present and the past— the switch to HP marking an orientation to a new scene in the narrative, and the switch to past marking the beginning of the new scene. Thus, these alternative ways of referring to events in the past function to organize the speaker's representation of experience in narrative, and to orient the hearer to that representation.

Footnotes

1. A longer version of this paper will discuss those factor groups which were designed to examine other constraints on, and functions of, tense sequencing. And whereas this paper looks only at tense sequences which result from tense switching, the longer version includes tense sequences in which one tense is maintained across clauses (sequences of HP-HP, or past-past).

2. Clauses which act as opening brackets can contain information which is not part of the the sequence of narrated action, despite their being narrative clauses in the technical sense of being in a relationship of temporal juncture with the next clause. Examples of these opening brackets are in the text of the paper. Closer inspection of the clauses which open a scene shows another type: adverbial clauses which provide temporal specification, e.g. and just as I get up to the pump, they run out of gas. These time adverbials share a function with other opening brackets, except that the scene which they open may be only one event long. The longer version of this paper will examine these clauses in more detail.

3. There are actually two possibilities being described here. One possible tense sequence contains one tense switch: past- past (opening bracket)- HP (initial event), or, HP- HP (opening bracket)- past (initial event). Either of these contains a tense switch only between the opening bracket and the initial event. The other possible tense sequence contains two tense switches, the additional switch coming at the opening bracket: past- HP (opening bracket)- past (initial event), or HP- past (opening bracket)- HP (initial event). These possibilities (as well as those in which there is only one switch which occurs at the opening bracket) will be examined in more detail.

4. Note that both finally and the closing bracket of scene boundaries were environments which disfavored tense switching.

References

Cedergren, H. & Sankoff, D. "Variable rules: Performance as a statistical reflection of competence." Language, Volume 50, Number 2, 1974

Labov, W. "The transformation of experience in narrative syntax." In Language in the Inner City. Philadelphia: University of Penna. Press, 1972

Wolfson, N. "The Conversational historical present in American English narrative." unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Univ. of Penna. 1976

A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE HISTORICAL PRESENT TENSE IN NARRATIVE

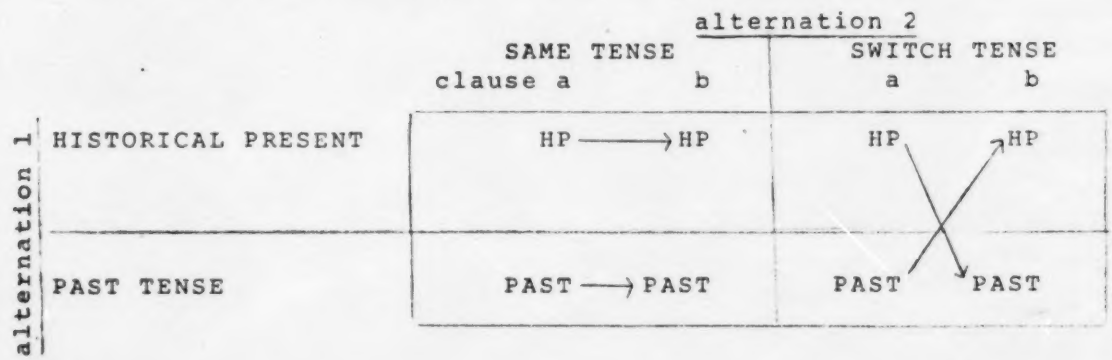
Deborah Schiffrin
University of Penna.
LSA Winter Meetings
Dec. 1978

Extract from a personal narrative:

(E) a Y'know, I was so frightened at the accident happening that I didn't want the pain.
(O) b And I think it was the third night I had got my shot at ten...
(O) c it was every four hours,
(CA) d and I fell asleep, y'know.
(O) e My nurse, I had a full time nurse,
(CA) f and she came in that day,
(CA) g and says, "Look, I know you didn't sleep all day. Why not? All night. Why not?"
(CA) h So I told her I was afraid of the pain.
(CA) i And she says, "Don't worry about the pain. You go to sleep."
(CA) j So I fell asleep after my shot at ten o'clock on the third night
(CA) k and around twelve, I wake up with excruciating pain
(CA) l and I rang to the nurse.
(CA) m And she says, "Yes dear."
(CA) n And I says, "I'm in pain, can you give me something?"
(CA) o She says, "Just a minute, and I'll look at your chart."
(CA) p She looked at my chart.

CA= Complicating action
E = Evaluation
O = Orientation

Tense sequences in complicating action section of narrative



Switching to the historical present

	Number of tokens	Percent of tense switch	Percent of tense switch to HP	Probability of tense switch rule	Probability of tense switch to HP rule
OVERALL RESULTS	1101	21%	51%	.44	.65
RESULTS ACCORDING TO ENVIRONMENTAL CONSTRAINTS					
FACTOR GROUPS:					
1. Scene boundaries					
Opening bracket	28	36%	70%	.53	.62
Initial event	28	46%	54%	.69	.43
Closing bracket	28	22%	60%	.40	.56
all others	1017	20%	51%	.37	.39
2. Transitional connectives					
well	29	55%	37%	.80	.34
all of a sudden	9	44%	75%	.69	.72
so	130	29%	42%	.57	.39
then	20	25%	60%	.49	.59
finally	12	17%	50%	.21	*
anyway	8	25%	50%	.33	*
none	893	19%	55%	.41	.46
3. Coordinating connectives					
and	525	17%	52%	.54	.57
but	38	13%	40%	.42	.42
none	538	23%	51%	.51	.53
4. Auxiliary: verb modification					
do not	24	8%	0%	.30	*
modals	21	14%	33%	.46	.39
passive	11	45%	20%	.80	.27
progressive	81	17%	71%	.46	.76
quasi modal:inceptive	32	31%	50%	.67	.58
quasi modal:iterative	12	8%	0%	.26	*
none	920	21%	53%	.53	.49
5. Focus of action: subject					
same as previous action	550	16%	42%	.44	.42
different than previous action	551	26%	57%	.57	.55